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Catholics, Lutherans and the Augsburg Confession

Through the profession of faith of the Lutheran churches, the Reformers hoped to create unity among Christians. After their own reforms of Vatican II, Catholics should calmly and prayerfully reexamine the document

Almost 450 years ago, in a Germany torn by religious conflict but not yet divided into separate churches, the Emperor Charles V invited the Lutheran territorial princes and electors to submit a written presentation of their beliefs and practices. The Emperor's concern was the restoration of a religious unity in his dominions so that he might turn with a united empire to face the danger of the Turks. The response of the Reformers, formulated by Philip Melancthon in both German and Latin, was presented to the Emperor at Augsburg on June 25, 1530. This document, known as the *Confessio Augustana*, or Augsburg Confession, was to become the basic confession of faith of the churches which would afterward be called "Lutheran."

The Confession was intended to be a presentation of the essentials of Christianity as understood by the Reformers. In its Preface, the Reformers express their desire to unite the various parties among themselves and "to put aside whatever may not have been rightly interpreted or treated by either side, to have all of us embrace and adhere to a single, true religion and live together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ." So the Reformers also wanted unity. Unfortunately, the polemical response formulated by the Roman theologians, principally by John Eck and Joseph Cochläus, failed to take advantage of the desire for unity expressed in the document, and so dissension hardened into schism between the Roman and "Lutheran" churches. Today, in the different climate of the post-Vatican-II church, a proposal has come from the Roman Catholic Graymoor Ecumenical Institute and the Lutheran

Forum for a joint observance of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980. As 1530 marked the beginning of the formal division, why could not a year-long program of shared study and interaction between Lutheran and Roman Catholic parishes lead to a rediscovery of unity in the one church of Christ? This proposal for an observance of the anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in the United States grows out of the recent dialogues between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, the history of which we should briefly review.

The Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue

On Feb. 9, 1972, the final report of the Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission was published, bringing to a close the first stage of the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue. The report, entitled "The Gospel and the Church," better known as the "Malta Report," did not represent a *formula concordiae*, or agreed statement. It did try to present a methodological and theological description of the points at issue in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. From this, two questions have emerged as important for the continuation of the dialogue: 1) How will the consensus that has been reached be received? and 2) What can be said about the unclarity regarding a common doctrine of the ministry?

A new international Lutheran-Catholic task force created in 1973 is attempting to address these issues. Therefore, in the light of the ecumenical documents, two tasks confront those in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue: 1) Consolidate what has been attained and create a broad, common basis of trust; and 2) Concretize the discussion regarding the

office of bishop, keeping in mind the concrete possibility of reestablishing church fellowship and ecclesiastical communion.

A common concern of those involved in the dialogue is the creation of a broad, common basis of trust between the two churches. One concrete proposal was made to the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Working Group in Rome in January 1974. The proposal was that the Roman Catholic Church recognize the Augsburg Confession as a testimony of catholic, ecclesial faith. In other words, the suggestion is that the Catholic Church recognize it as the norm of evangelical Lutheranism and as a legitimate expression of Christian truth, and that it express in its own manner and idiom the same content of faith that the Roman Catholic Church confesses.

What would be the advantage of this? First, in recognizing the Confession as a statement of catholic, ecclesial faith, the Roman Catholic Church would help to dispel many Roman Catholic misapprehensions and illusions concerning Lutheranism. These misapprehensions and illusions are rooted in the polemics of the Reformation and its aftermath, especially some of the exaggerated statements of the Reformers in the early, radical period of the Reformation between the years 1520-25. Such a recognition would also serve as a corrective to the polemical Catholic habit of using these extreme positions to characterize Lutheranism in succeeding years and centuries. To restrict the Lutheran churches of the Reformation to the statements of the young Luther is an inadmissible reductionism, begun during the Reformation by the Catholic theologian Joseph Cochläus in his evaluation of the

Confession and one that unfortunately is sometimes practiced by Roman Catholics even today. A second advantage would be the recognition of a common expression of faith, which could provide a basis for a new trust and fellowship between the churches.

Theology of the Confession

It is important to emphasize that the Augsburg Confession is explicitly intended to be an expression of the faith of the universal, catholic church on the part of what we now call the Lutheran churches. In presenting "a summary of the doctrines that are preached and taught in our churches," it argues not only that its teaching is grounded on Scripture, but also that it "is not contrary or opposed to that of the universal Christian church, or even of the Roman Church (in so far as the latter's teaching is reflected in the writings of the Fathers)."

The first part of the Confession treats of basic faith and doctrine. In the first 21 articles, it covers the Triune God, original sin, the Son of God, justification, the office of the ministry, the new obedience, the church, baptism, confession, repentance, the use of the sacraments, the regular calling of ministers, church usage or rites, civil government, the second coming, freedom of the will, the cause of sin, faith and good works and the cult of the saints. The second part deals with various abuses in the late medieval church and with the changes introduced by the Reformers. In reading the document, one senses that the real concern was not so much church doctrine as it was abuses in the church. Indeed, at the end of the doctrinal section, the Reformers state explicitly that "the dispute and dissension are chiefly concerned with various traditions and abuses."

In the seven articles that follow, a Catholic today can only wonder at the sorry state of the church in those days, while recognizing at the same time that many of the reforms introduced by the Lutherans have since Vatican II become commonplace in the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformers argue for Communion under both kinds, reform of the liturgy, including vernacular hymns and good instruction concerning the sacraments, and renewal of confession, an em-

phasis on the voluntary character of fasts and mortifications, a rejection of the idea that monastic vows were equal to baptism or that a monastic life could earn justification or the forgiveness of sins, rejection, too, of the practice of admitting to vows men and women younger than the canonical age.

In addressing the question of episcopal power, it acknowledges that bishops have God-given power to preach the Gospel, forgive and retain sins and to administer the sacraments, while distinguishing the "temporal authority and the sword" given the bishops by human right for temporal or civil administration.

The most radical change that appears in the Confession is the abolition of the requirement of clerical celibacy. The Reformers were as aware as we are today that clerical celibacy was a matter of church discipline. Their concern here was to address the scandal caused by the failures in the observance of celibacy on the part of so many priests. They point out that celibacy is a charism in the proper sense, a gift of God, not a requirement of law.

For Roman Catholics to recognize the Confession as a Lutheran expression of catholic, ecclesial faith would be also to acknowledge that the binding norm (*norma normans*) of Lutheran faith and

Catholic theology renewed by Vatican II rather than against the backdrop of the polemics of the Reformation. What then does the document teach?

The Augsburg Confession affirms the trinitarian theology of the Council of Nicaea, rejecting the contrary heresies. It affirms the reality of original sin, the need for and gratuitous character of redemption. It acknowledges the Christology of the early councils, including the virgin birth. Justification and the forgiveness of sin cannot be won by our own merit, as Roman Catholics would also acknowledge. Rather, justification and forgiveness of sin is merited by Christ and is ours through faith.

In addition, it affirms that "to obtain such faith, God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments." The Catholic concern for the efficacy of the sacraments is met in the statement that "the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests who administer them are wicked men." It acknowledges that baptism is necessary, that grace is offered through it and that even children should be baptized. In regard to the Eucharist, the Reformers assert that "it is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the forms of bread and wine and are there distributed and

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doctrine is not any single theologian, not even Luther himself, but the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, especially the Augsburg Confession. It is not to the writings of Luther but to the Confession that a Lutheran pastor is committed by ordination. As a confessional statement that proposes to be an expression of the faith of the Catholic Church, it is important to read its doctrinal presentation in the light of a

received." Confession with private absolution should be maintained and encouraged, even though it is neither necessary nor possible to enumerate all trespasses and sins. It is interesting to note that the Council of Trent's only specific reference to the Augsburg Confession is in relation to confession. In treating confession, it focuses on repentance and faith, while Trent lists three elements: repentance, confession and

satisfaction. But the Augsburg Confession is not attempting to enumerate the parts of the sacrament of penance; its concern is to speak of the inner nature of repentance, contrition and faith. Furthermore, the form of the sacrament is a question of church discipline, not of Christian doctrine. Few Roman Catholics today would disagree with the statement that "those who sin after baptism receive forgiveness of sin whenever they come to repentance, and absolution should not be denied them by the church."

In the matter of church ministry, the Confession affirms "that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call (*rite vocatus*)."

The catholic character of the Augsburg Confession emerges clearly. Some questions might be approached differently by Roman Catholics. For example, a Catholic might wish for a clear distinction between justification and the forgiveness of sin, merited by Christ alone, and sanctification, the process through which a person deepens the life of grace within himself by means of prayer, worship and good works. Others might seek a clear affirmation of the sacramental character of ordination, which the "Apology" of the Augsburg Confession is willing to acknowledge, although

the papal office, infallibility and the mariological dogmas of 1854 and 1950. But in these matters, Catholic theologians have argued that it would be anachronistic to demand of a 16th-century confession of faith conformity to dogmatic developments of the 19th and 20th centuries. For Roman Catholics, Eucharistic fellowship is possible in principle with the Orthodox churches who do not acknowledge the papal dogma of the First Vatican Council. In this respect, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger has argued:

"One who stands on the ground of Catholic theology cannot consider the forms of the 19th- and 20th-century papacy as the only possible and necessary form for all Christians. One cannot say that what was possible for a thousand years is not possible today. Rome should not demand from the East more on the doctrine of the primacy than was formulated and taught in the first thousand years. On this basis, recognition is possible. The East should not describe the Western development as heretical."

In today's church, when Lutherans in dialogue with Roman Catholics have acknowledged the possibility of recognizing a renewed Petrine ministry, what Cardinal Ratzinger argues in relation to the

episcopacy. Cardinal Jan Willebrands, head of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, has noted two key issues that have been raised by those reacting to the Malta Report.

First, since unity in faith is an essential condition for future unity between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Churches, what constitutes the necessary and/or sufficient content of agreement needed for this purpose? Perhaps here a help can be found in the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). In the ARCIC statements, the term "substantial agreement" was chosen to designate the kind of agreement that would overcome obstacles to unity. Substantial agreement is different from full agreement. The Canadian Dominican, J.M.R. Tillard, who developed the implications of this concept in a study paper for ARCIC, points out that substantial agreement implies a remaining "pluralism of doctrine." Thus, the ARCIC Windsor Agreement on the Eucharist found "substantial agreement" on the doctrine of the real presence, in spite of differences that remained between the two traditions on the question of the adoration of the consecrated bread and wine. For many Anglicans, this practice, so important in the Roman Catholic Eucharistic tradition, was difficult to explain or justify on a biblical basis. Here, a not insignificant degree of difference remained, within the context of a substantial agreement on the meaning of the Eucharist. The suggestion in the present case is this: Given the degree of theological pluralism within churches today, substantial agreement should be sufficient between churches.

A second and more significant question for Roman Catholics is the question of the minister of the Eucharist and episcopacy. The Confession defines the only holy Christian church as "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments administered according to the Gospel." These two requirements are sufficient (*satis est*) for the true unity of the church. Lutherans generally maintain that "as long as the ordained ministry is maintained, any form of polity which serves the proclamation of the Gospel is acceptable," as the U. S. document, "Lutherans and Catholics in

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Lutherans in general are reluctant to do so. The unwillingness of the Confession to acknowledge the intercessory power of Mary and the saints might disturb some Catholics who experience devotion to the saints as a venerable and fruitful tradition, but this is a question of piety, certainly not an issue that should divide the church.

A Roman Catholic might also object that the Confession omits mention of

Orthodox could also be argued in the case of the Lutherans as far as the more recent papal and mariological dogmas are concerned.

Some Remaining Questions

As we noted at the beginning, the crucial question that has emerged in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue is the question of the Eucharistic ministry and the

Dialogue IV: Eucharist and Ministry," states. But according to Roman Catholic and Orthodox doctrine, episcopal structure (what Anglicans call the "historic episcopate") belongs to the essence of the church and its unity.

The issue becomes particularly acute today when the question of the minister

of the subcommission proposed as a common Lutheran-Catholic declaration that "the Eucharist can only be celebrated under the direction of the ordained minister." The Lutheran theologians were not able to accept this, responding: "We cannot say that the Eucharist can only be celebrated under

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of the Eucharist emerges as the crucial question in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. In a paper prepared for the above-mentioned document, "Eucharist and Ministry," the Lutheran scholar John Reumann analyzed two different approaches to the theology of the ministry, which appear first in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions and which have been carried down in a state of tension within the history of Lutheranism. While Lutheran Orthodoxy generally enhanced the status and concept of the ordained ministry as a public office of ministry, instituted by God through the church, the later movement of Pietism stressed the priesthood of all believers. Although Reumann does not find this tension irreducible, the debate continues today within Lutheranism. He notes that some in Europe have argued that baptism really amounts to ordination and have proposed that laymen be authorized to administer the Lord's Supper, while others are increasingly emphasizing the Lutheran ministry as a "presbyteral succession."

The Augsburg Confession speaks of the ministry as an "office of preaching" (*Predigtamt*) and argues that no one should publicly preach or teach or administer the sacraments without a regular call. Yet Lutherans and Catholics are not yet agreed on who is able to celebrate the Eucharist. In his report on the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, published in 1977, Cardinal Willebrands points out that at a subcommission meeting of the Joint Lutheran-Catholic Working Group on "Eucharist and Ministry," the Catholic theologians

of the subcommission proposed as a common Lutheran-Catholic declaration that "the Eucharist can only be celebrated under the direction of the ordained minister."

In this question of the minister of the Eucharist, there remains substantial disagreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, a disagreement that is rooted in the fact that the Augsburg Confession and the Symbolic Books are interpreted differently among Lutherans. And different interpretations of the Confession in a matter so central to Roman Catholics as the nature of the Eucharistic ministry could argue against its recognition by the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps, through prayerful study and reflection, this question can be resolved by the International Lutheran-Catholic Study Commission and the Joint Working Group.

One further problem remains, as Cardinal Willebrands notes, the question of church authority. Specifically, the question is raised, does there exist any authority among the Lutheran churches that can make binding declarations? The recent joint statements, such as "The Malta Report" and the "Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in the United States," are meant to express the positions of the churches involved today. But they have not yet been officially acknowledged by those churches, and hence are not official, binding church documents. Furthermore, unlike the conferences of bishops united with the Pope, the Lutheran World Federation does not have the authority to approve formally these documents as church documents. Therefore, in the interest of recognizing the Confession as a binding statement of catholic, ecclesial faith, the Catholic Church will want to ask how these

disputed questions within Lutheranism will be decided by the Lutheran Church.

So some serious questions remain. The agreements formulated in ecumenical dialogues are not instruments of diplomacy, reducing issues to an acceptable common denominator. Rather, they seek to discover and express agreement in the essentials of the faith. Nevertheless, in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, most of the issues that have divided the churches historically have already been resolved on a theological level. What is needed now is for the two churches to rediscover on a grass-roots level the common bond of faith they share. From this perspective, the proposal of the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute and the Lutheran Forum for a year-long joint study of the Augsburg Confession, especially on the parish level, could greatly facilitate such a rediscovery. The proposal should be welcomed and encouraged.

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